STAT

A19

Stephen S. Rosenfeld — WASHINGTON POST — 14 JAN 1977

STAT

'Preemptive Leaking'

We have it from outgoing intelligence chief George Bush that "the worst thing" he could do would be to discuss publicly "sensitive conclusions of national intelligence estimates." He said so on "Face the Nation" by way of fending off questions on the controversy over the CIA's "somber" new estimate of the Kremlin's strategic aims.

But surely Bush has got it upside down. Especially at this moment when, fairly or not, the integrity if not the competence of the intelligence estimating process has come into question, talking straight to the people might be the best thing an intelligence chief could do.

Who, after all, should be better qualified to lay out the kinds of evidence that go into estimates, the different methods of assessment, and the choices thus offered to policy-makers? Bush is the one official in government who, by his position, not only has the facts available to him but, presumably, is not under a temptation to bend the facts to support any one department's budget request or policy preference.

Bush notes that he has a duty to protect intelligence "sources and methods." Quite so. But like a lot of other Washington journalists, I have been hearing for years about some of these "sources and methods," and I am persuaded that—with rare exception—virtually everything I have heard could be released, and on a timely basis, without harm.

Prompt disclosure could have other public benefits. For instance, I recently heard a knowledgeable official reporting, off the record, certain intelligence findings about Soviet military activities. A few days later, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld declared in a public speech that "the facts drive one to the clear conclusion that the United States must act now and in the future to reverse these adverse trends by providing real increases for national security."

A white-hot branding iron could not draw from me the substance of those off-the-record ruminations. I violate no confidence, however, by reporting that the "facts" that were adduced off the record did not point to anything near what I would call a "clear conclusion," one way or the other. They point to a judgment call. Maybe Rumsfeld's right about our defense needs. My point is that, even when you toss in the evidence I heard privately, he has not made the case he asserts publicly. This, I would argue, the public has a right to know.

The incoming Secretary of Defense, Harold Brown, I might add, is not necessarily an improvement in this regard. True, he does not come to these questions cold. But even before he has had the chance to study the new estimates, or to order up his own, he declares that there is a need for "real growth" in U.S. military programs. Again, maybe Brown is right. But he does not build confidence in either the intelligence process or the budget-making process by sounding off without demonstrating to the public the basis on which his judgments are made.

In fact, the real argument is not over what should legitimately be kept secret but over the terms of disclosure. We journalists don't know what we don't know, but we do know that most material offered up for our off-the-record elucidation will sooner or later—usually sooner—turn up in the public domain. Either it's furnished openly by officials with an ax to grind, or it's leaked by those same officials, often to journalists who play that leak with an eye to rendering themselves available for the next.

Bush, pronouncing himself "appalled" by the latest leaks on the intelligence estimates, says "there's little we can do about it." But there's plenty he and other officials can do about it. They can make a fresh estimate of what the public is entitled to know. They can help demystify intelligence by cutting back the misguided and often self-serving tendency to regard both process and product as matters too sensitive to be shared with those in whose name they are justified.

The executive branch clings to the notion that intelligence is its own property, to be disclosed or withheld on its own judgment. The new Congress presumably will address this untenable contention more diligently than its predecessors. I would note here only that the executive should understand that the Congress, with its own procedures for discretion, can serve as a useful halfway house, as a good place to air information not regarded as fit to be let loose on the street.

The Pentagon already puts out an annual "posture statement" on American forces. Why not a parallel statement on Soviet forces? From time to time now the CIA publishes monographs; one came out just this week on Soviet military spending. Why not take the leap and publish a full-scale analysis?

True, information is power, and it can be used for smaller personal and bureaucratic purposes as well as larger national ones. The best way to balk "damaging" leaks of special-interest material, however, is to make a broad range of material available routinely in a context devised not by the special interest but by the government itself. Call it preemptive leaking, or public information.

Bush says he's learned that "intelligence-estimating isn't all that hard"—that is, estimates are not firm, they're "judgmental." But this is no reason to spare the public exposure to the exercise. It is not as though most people cannot cope with the idea that it's hard to pin down developments in the future. Of course they can cope. Advocates of "open government," please take note.